

# THE SECRET ART OF TOM POULTON OF



AJ MACLEAN  
THE *Erotic* Print Society

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by  
Alexander James MACLEAN

THE *Erotic* Print Society

THE *Erotic Print Society*,  
London 1998

Dedicated to the memory of  
BEECHER MOORE – who  
made fantasies happen. A friend  
and patron of Tom Poulton, a dis-  
tinguished yachtsman, restauran-  
teur and a connoisseur of erotic  
art.

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Two Underground Novellas:  
*The Tale of Penny*  
*Fidelis Infidelis*

Sexual intercourse began in nineteen sixty-three  
(Which was rather late for me)  
Between the end of the Chatterly ban  
And the Beatles first LP.

*Philip Larkin*

## FOREWORD

This book brings to light for the first time the sexually explicit work of Tom Poulton, a reputable British artist. Poulton's erotic œuvre spans a period when such art was banned from public sale or exhibition, and it is not surprising that this remarkable group of drawings came to light nearly thirty-five years after the artist's death. While it is unlikely that he would have faced prosecution for creating these drawings, the authorities would almost certainly have prosecuted him had he tried to sell or publish his work. It is even more certain that these images would have earned him the strongest opprobrium from the majority of his contemporaries. During Tom Poulton's life the social climate was such that erotic art was either appreciated by the museum and art Establishment behind the closed doors of academe, or in the more bohemian artistic and literary circles of London. A broader public, however, would only have been able to applaud his conventional, less controversial work.

To place Poulton's erotic work in context, I found myself examining the gulf between present-day attitudes towards sex and erotica and those that were prevalent when this large collection of clandestine drawings was formed – from the period just after the war until he died in 1963. That his death came just before this dawning of today's sexual enlightenment struck me as some kind of irony. For the Britain of Poulton's lifetime was still a world of sexual double standards and hypocrisy. Many of his contemporaries would have been fascinated by what is available in the way of erotic art and literature today, though it is doubtful that they would have admitted as much then. Little or no distinction was made between erotic art and pornography. And pornography was considered a very bad thing indeed, far more so than today.

Why did the British feel so deeply uncomfortable and inhibited about their own and others' sexuality? And what was available to those who sought out erotica in the twenty-odd years before the 'permissive society' exploded into being? These were questions that seemed worth attempting to answer.



## THE AUSTERITY YEARS: SEX IN BRITAIN 1945-63

The American invasion of Britain towards the end of World War II resulted in tens of thousands of British brides returning to the United States with their GI husbands. For every one of these honourable encounters there were many that ended in abandonment and illegitimate children. Added to the easy-going, relaxed approach so entirely foreign to these shores, this currency of hitherto unavailable nylons and glamorous escape was entirely irresistible to British maidenhood. A generation of increasingly sexually aware, if not very sophisticated, young women arose. And after this second world conflict, the class cocktail had once again been vigorously agitated and barriers were lowered still further. 'Live-in' domestic servants were increasingly a thing of the past (despite the pronouncement of the learned council for the prosecution in the Chatterly trial giving an appearance to the contrary). The battalions of housemaids, palourmaids, cooks and nannies found employment elsewhere and the middle classes discovered a harder, but more private, existence. Throughout the social fabric of Britain there was a very gradual relaxation of the strict rules laid down by the establishment.

Between the end of the war and the beginning of the so-called 'sexual revolution' of the mid-sixties, a deceptively sedate and prudish moral climate prevailed in this country. Exhausted by six years of world conflict, post-war Britain offered little in the way of romantic or, indeed, erotic relief. There was, it's true, a feeling of regeneration, a new start with a new Labour government. But there was also a definite need, after the social chaos of war, to return to 'decent' middle-class family values, to put the nation's house in order, and to get on with rearing the next generation. Men who had left for war in their mid-twenties suddenly found themselves thirty-something bachelors, a situation unheard of in an age when most British males would marry far earlier. They had to quickly cast around for a mate and court them before they became abnormally old suitors. So no more the hectic, promiscuous wartime encounters – instead a strong desire for a restoration to the pre-war order of things: a retrogressive, slippers-on-the-hearth mentality and the wholesome family life summed up by the Ovaltine advertisements of a cosy, firelit household listening to the radio, sipping their hot bedtime drink.

Sexual adventures were not really for the British. The mood reflected by films such as David Lean's *Brief Encounter* (1945), and novels such as Graham Greene's *The End of the Affair* (1951) bear testimony to this. By and large, womenfolk had stayed



English School Girl c. 1800 The Curious Maid





Health and Efficiency Cover 1934

at home, either to make bombs, be hearty land girls or, decked out in cute Wren uniforms, push model ships around Admiralty table charts and bite a quivering lower lip whenever 'one of ours' went down. However there was also a group of cosmopolitan females of greater urbanity and sophistication. During the course of the war, especially towards its end, these women had gone abroad and experienced a different way of life, whether in Naples, Port Said or the Far East, that had given them a taste for adventure.

Before the war, morality and sex were contained in a rigid social framework, within a working, middle or upper class background. The war acted as a huge wooden spoon, whose stirring ruptured the carefully layered social strata as well as the complacency and moral values of the masses. On the surface, everything appeared much as before but below, new appetites were swirling dangerously. People were coming to demand more.

## A Victorian Legacy

The image of a promiscuous *entre-deux-guerres* adventuress indulging in an orgy of wild affairs belongs more to the fictional world of Anita Loos' *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* or Christopher Isherwood's *Sally Bowles* than reality. Without doubt, World War I had a largely beneficial effect on women's independence, but apart from a few bohemian cliques with international connections, many Victorian moral values persisted in Britain until well into the twentieth century.

Founded in the nineteenth century, when there was a real cause for protecting young girls from prostitution, the 'Social Purity and Hygiene Movement' was a lobby group to safeguard public morals. No doubt some of its members were well-intentioned. However the overall effect of this powerful body was to render the populace so utterly terrified and ignorant of sex that when more serious and qualified individuals tried to introduce reforms, be they information on birth control or sexual enlightenment, they found themselves prosecuted on obscenity charges. Both Marie Stopes, the founder of birth control clinics in Britain, and Havelock Ellis, a pioneer of research into human sexuality and author of the seven-volume *Studies in the Psychology of Sex*, suffered in this respect.

Most schools and youth organizations were segregated by sex. In fact, not only the educational system, but also parents, the church, the judiciary, the media and the government all worked hard to make pre-marital sex unattainable and daunting. Girls in particular, seen as the 'weaker' sex, were issued with dire warnings of the

consequences of promiscuity. For the working classes, and occasionally for the middle classes, these were no empty threats. Pregnancy outside marriage would result in instant dismissal from any job and, if no family support were forthcoming, mother and child were placed in institutional care.

The institutions concerned were largely the workhouse (from 1929 until their demise in 1945 known as a 'Public Assistance' institution) but often mental asylums. In these, thanks to the Mental Deficiency Act of 1913, any destitute unmarried mother could be detained indefinitely on the grounds of 'feeble-mindedness', and her child sent to an orphanage. Such was the terror these places inspired that young girls would often place themselves at the mercy of backstreet abortionists who would administer their primitive 'skills', sometimes resulting in terrible injuries or death. For boys and young men, the threats were less severe. Masturbation was viewed as a deadly sin, with all sorts of dreadful physical consequences, given credence by medical 'experts' of the time.

There were many innocent victims of this vicious circle of ignorance that forced youth into a straitjacket of sexual unawareness through grave admonishments on the one hand and a complete lack of information on the other. It was hardly surprising that sex, as a recreational event, was simply not recognized. But, for the intelligent and determined, there were always ways of finding out more – and acting upon this information.

## A Climate of Ignorance

One of the very few sources of information about sex in post-war Britain was the sex manual, which was certainly an improvement on the inter-war variety, but still bearing no resemblance to today's glossy, explicitly illustrated versions such as *The Joy of Sex*. Take *The Red Light, Intimate Hygiene for Men and Women*, a charming little book by Rennie Macandrew, published in January 1946 by The Wales Publishing Company and costing one shilling and sixpence. Apart from two sparse line diagrams of the male and female reproductive systems, there are no illustrations. The emphasis was on sex after marriage, and restraint before. Macandrew, a disciple of Havelock Ellis, was also deeply concerned about venereal disease, namely syphilis and gonorrhoea. This was certainly a wartime souvenir brought home by returning troops and, indeed, the incidence of VD was so high that it was considered to be a national epidemic, not unlike that of AIDS in our own time. Even though penicillin had been discovered five years before, the author seemed unaware of it as a certain cure.

His views on masturbation, at least, were more enlightened. He conceded the need



See Fashion Illustration for *The Weekend Book* 1933.27



"As the vaginal opening becomes slippery you will know that your wife is waiting for you."

"It is the women who 'lie like logs' who lose their menfolk. The successful wife knows that her husband likes to have his male organ gently stroked, and when both are ready, for her to slip it into the place which nature made for it."

"Intercourse need not always be performed in the same position, although the most usual way is for the woman to lie on her back, with knees apart and raised, and the man superimposed. Other positions should be tried, for variety is the spice of love."



These manuals were mainly to be obtained in 'sex shops'—establishments which also went under the wonderful euphemisms of 'surgical supply stores' or 'rubber stores'—though the reference to rubber was more likely to do with rubber sheaths, latex surgical trusses and incontinence pants than the glamorous fetish-wear of today. Some of the proprietors of these rather seedy shops would provide (for those daring enough to enter) advice on contraception and even the facts of life. Others were associated with the murky world of prostitution, illegal abortions and pornography.

## The Samizdat Pornographers

In 1802 the publisher Thomas Bowdler founded the Society for the Suppression of Vice. He also had the gall to rewrite and issue his own 'Bowdlerised' edition of Shakespeare, substituting the passages he considered too rude for family consumption. In 1857 Parliament brought in the Obscene Publications Act, which established procedures for the seizure of obscene material and the prosecution of its publishers. Since then a ruthlessly consistent campaign has kept pornography—and more importantly, pornographers, at bay.

By the end of the last war—possibly because of homecoming troops returning with pornographic novels acquired on the continent—there was a demand for written pornography that could not be satisfied by national publishers and booksellers for fear of prosecution. A curious exception to this rule was *Health and Efficiency*, a magazine which purported to promote the delights of naturism, but which actually contained a number of poorly printed and carefully airbrushed black and white photographs of naked men, women and children for the almost exclusive and lustful



consumption of dirty old, middle aged and young men. Otherwise the vacuum was filled by 'amateur' pornographers who not only wrote but printed and published their own work. These 'samizdat' editions were painstakingly typed out – sometimes on stencil machines, sometimes with carbon paper copies – and quite often without any duplication at all. Not surprisingly, they were of very mixed quality, from a literary point of view, ranging from the surprisingly inventive to the downright abysmal. Whether they were distributed beyond a small group of friends or the 'sex shops' mentioned above – and what sort of financial gain was involved if they were – is uncertain. But judging by the number that survive today, the output must have been considerable. Two full-length examples are published at the end of this book.

The Kinsey Reports of 1948 and 1953 (on male and female sexuality) were, to some extent, mirrored by four major British sex surveys made between 1947 and 1956. These included *General Attitudes to Sex* of 1949, part of Harrison's Mass Observation programme and the largest, *Chester's Life, Sexual Morality and Family Relationships of the English Woman* of 1956. At last sex began to be thought of as a concept, if not a form of entertainment, and advertising agencies grew more aware of the importance of using subliminally erotic imagery in television and film commercials.

Americans were, at this stage, ahead of the game. In December 1953 the first edition of *Playboy* Magazine with the naked Marilyn Monroe as centre spread appeared. Britain hit back in the same year with Fleming's sexually amoral James Bond in *Casino Royale*, the first series of thrillers to eclipse the likes of 'Sapper's' white supremacists Bulldog Drummond and Jim Martindale, heroes who always had to marry their Phyllis or Sheila. Coinciding with Fleming's jet-age exoticism was the first chance to indulge in a pale imitation of real thing: cheap package holidays became available for the first time. Couples and young marrieds away from the vigilance and claustrophobia of the seaside boarding house behaved with less inhibition than ever before, while those who stayed at home encountered a mellowing in the attitudes of previously fire-breathing landladies now more interested in full occupancy than high standards of morality.

Like a sedate maiden aunt, *Health & Efficiency* gracefully gave way to the younger *Playboy*, *Penthouse* and our own, home-grown variety of soft-porn gaily mags, though these were still not numerous enough to fill a newspaper's top shelf. And at a rather more highbrow level, the warm winds of liberal reform swept through bookshops releasing titles previously restricted to a Parisian publishing debut and only brought into this country buried at the bottom



of suitcases. Although James Joyce's epic novel *Ulysses* (first published in Paris in 1922 and now hailed as the finest novel of the 20th Century) was first published in Britain in 1936, Molly Bloom's famous and highly erotic stream of consciousness soliloquy went largely unnoticed outside literary and academic circles. Not so DH Lawrence's *Lady Chatterley's Lover* (first published in Paris, 1928) which was brought out by Penguin in 1960. The establishment immediately seized upon it and prosecuted for obscenity, giving rise to the famous question put to the jury by Mervyn Griffith-Jones for the prosecution, "Is it a book you would even wish your wife or servants to read?" (thereby highlighting, at a stroke, the sexist and patronising attitudes of the establishment both towards women and the dwindling domestic working classes)

But what Mr Griffith-Jones did more than anything with that famous piece of legal rhetoric was to underline the out-of-touch attitudes of the British legal profession. In the same year as *Lady Chatterley's* debut in Britain, another book appeared, one that might well have been an easier challenge for the Crown. It was Vladimir Nabokov's *Invitation of a Beulah Girl* (first published in Paris by the Olympia Press in 1955). Such is the current global obsession with paedophilia that were this book published for the first time today a prosecution against it could well succeed.

## You've Got To Laugh

One of the few palliatives to the unrelentingly dull existence of life before 1963 was the British Sense of Humour. One of George Orwell's best essays is on Donald McGill, the seaside postcard artist who suggested that sex was naughty but nice and got away with it. While the moral guardians were not prepared to put up with explicit smut, they grudgingly allowed a little innocent bawdiness, even if bawdiness can ever be entirely innocent. Apart from McGill's land but brilliant images of red-cheeked, heavy-bosomed, indignant matrons and parsimonious Scots, there was the long running series of *Curry On* films where bad taste and bitartry generally vanquished prudery. As well as McGill's postcards, the seaside also provided a temporary way of forgetting humdrum lives and occasioned plenty of opportunities for casual flirtations and short affairs. Small wonder that during the 1950s the illegitimacy rate was higher in seaside resorts than anywhere else in the country.



## Escape To Adventure

With such a dearth of pornography, the real thing had a certain appeal – how ever risky it was. The new affluence that Harold Macmillan's government (1957–1963) brought about meant that many people had more disposable cash. As the motor industry revived, cars were a means of escape from the vigilance of parents and the back seat provided a cosy environment for seduction. Christian Dior's New Look of 1947 was a romantic approach, achieved with lengthened skirts with extra petticoats for fullness, unpadded shoulders, narrowed waists, and padded hips. There was no doubt that this style was not only romantic – but also feminine, carefree and sexy – emphasizing the natural curves of the female form. Over the next eighteen years, the hemline gradually rose.

By the early 1940s it was public knowledge that all venereal diseases were treatable and most were curable. Prophylactics were more reliably made than the pre-war product and readily available from chemists, barber shops and – sex shops. Accidents still happened but female independence was on the ascendant. Lynne Reid Bank's *The L-shaped Room* (published in 1960) was the first novel to celebrate single motherhood rather than condemn it. Groups of furtive wife-swappers began to submerge together in the Home Counties – no doubt a result of the first cheap package tours where total strangers were thrown together for the first time in exotic and unfamiliar locations such as Majorca and saw each other with far less clothing on than usual. At the beginning of the 1960s, strip clubs were sprouting all over Soho and a new pornography was asserting itself.

Although the vicious circle of sexual ignorance in Britain affected almost every sphere of life – one unexpected area of sexual illumination was the press. Newspapers like *The News of the World* were increasingly full of ad nauseum horror stories of the 'Vicar Discovered with Verger's Wife' or 'Maltese White Slaver' variety. These stories – juxtaposed with booming sermons from the great and the good – kept the readership informed of whatever little vice was available. They were avidly consumed at the middle-class Sunday breakfast table – crystallizing attitudes still further – and forming a hard crust of disapproval beneath which seethed unhealthily repressed passions. The readers were snug in the security of their own impoverished and deficient sex lives while rejoicing, with bitter *Schadenfreude*, at the discomfiture of those who strayed from the path of sexual convention.

However, the newspapers' carefully orchestrated programme of vicarious sex and moral thunderings from bishops and politicians eventually backfired – it became a familiar institution and – bit by bit – as with most institutions – was first viewed with an

affectionate scepticism and eventually with contempt, especially by the younger generation. This cynical ploy became more and more transparent and one event in particular caused it to collapse completely.

In June 1963 the House of Commons heard the grovelling confession of the Secretary of State for War John Profumo, that he had lied to the House while denying a sexual relationship with Christine Keeler, one of a ring of expensive call girls. It got worse. Keeler had also provided her services to Captain Ivanov, a naval attaché of the Soviet embassy in London and probably a Russian spy. Profumo was disgraced and forced to resign. Then MI6 was accused of incompetence for failing to inform the Prime Minister of an obvious security risk. The press had a field day and turned viciously on Macmillan for trying to protect Profumo and the old boy network. An official investigation by Lord Denning cleared other ministers of misconduct, but revealed that many establishment figures were deeply involved in exotic sex, pornography and drugs. Macmillan retired hurt and the Tory government limped on for another year under the good-hearted but tweedy Sir Alex. Douglas Home.

The Profumo scandal helped to destroy the public's respect for the Establishment. Moreover it made the public at large acutely aware of a life that was hitherto concealed from them: an amoral, glamorous existence of call girls, high living and intrigue. Though many were appalled, most were intrigued and not a little jealous. From the Charter's Trial onwards, an attitude which was henceforth gradually eroded until it was eventually laid to rest by the *D. or Little Red Schoolbook* trial of 1971.

## Deluge

From 1961 one can chart the rising graph of "permissiveness" in terms of key dates and events:

1961 *Private Eye* magazine is first published and does more in the next three decades to deflate the post-Empire Great Britain's residual pomposity.

1963 The Beatles success story begins. The Rolling Stones are formed. The first Bond movie appears. The Profumo scandal makes headlines. Sex, drugs, and only just rock and roll. 'You've never had it so good' takes on an entirely different meaning and a year later a disaffected British electorate boots out the Conservative government. Thirteen years of Tory misrule as the incumbent prime minister will become inordinately fond of saying, is at an end. John Cleland's *Fanny Hill* repub-





lished, slightly more than two hundred years after its initial appearance, giving rise to an interesting concession by the authorities. Plain old pornography – if sufficiently venerable – transmogrifies into a ‘valuable social document’ of historical significance.

1964 Harold Wilson’s Labour Government comes to power.

1965 Mary Quant invents the miniskirt and later shaves her pubic hair in the shape of a heart, a move copied, in part at least, by French couturiers Courrèges and Cardin. As if encouraged by this bold fashion statement GucciONE went pink, with *Penthouse* pipping Helmer’s *Playboy* to the post. Thousands discover what so appalled John Ruskin – that even nice girls have hair between their legs.

1967 Family Planning Act allows free contraceptive pills for all women. The Permissive Society begins in earnest. The Abortion Act is passed – in case anyone missed the news about the Pill. The stage musical *Hair* – with full on stage nudity for the first time ever, is produced.

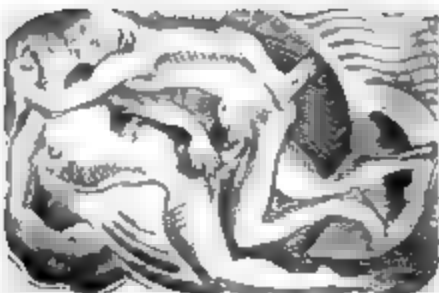
1968 Home Secretary Roy Jenkins sacks the Lord Chancellor in his capacity as a theatrical censor. Homosexuality is legalised. Sex, Drugs & Rock & Roll is here to stay. Donald McGill postcards and *Carry On* films (running since 1957) start to look dated and tame.

1969 Ken Tynan’s *Oh Calcutta* is staged in the West End. Sex education in state schools is introduced as part of the compulsory curriculum.

1971 The first Anne Summers sex shop is opened. Sex in Britain becomes commercialised, if not institutionalised.

1975 A Feminist triumph. Equal Pay legislation is passed, paving the way for an entirely new feminist vision of sex and the family. The concept of the single mother as a semi-respectable alternative to married parents comes into being.

## EROTIC ART & ILLUSTRATION: THE ENGLISH TRADITION



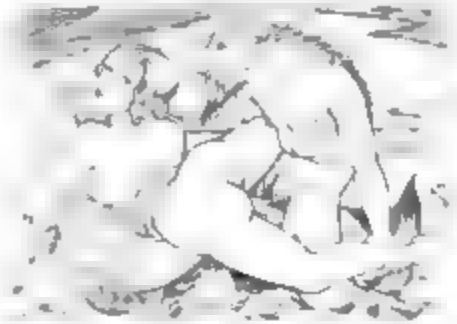
It has to be said that the English tradition of erotic art is weak and on occasion tenuous in the extreme. Some of the blame for this can be laid at the door of the fat, greedy and despotic Henry VIII – thanks to him most artists working in Britain until the middle of the eighteenth century were imported. The satirical and moral paintings and prints of the first ‘proper’ English painter, William Hogarth (1697–1764), were often full of sensual detail and, on occasion, expressly erotic, as in the Fitzwilliam’s *Before and After*. But place this work beside the more risqué French Rococo art of the time and there is suddenly a strong sense of déjà vu. The same

could be said of Hogarth's contemporary John Cleland's (1709-1789) *Fanny Hill* and the earlier salacious novels of the French Enlightenment. Not so with Thomas Rowlandson (1756-1827) who towards the end of his career and the beginning of the nineteenth century produced a portfolio of ribald erotic art that is intrinsically British. A mistrust of foreign influence, especially French, was understandable due to the Napoleonic Wars, but this led to, at best, a sense of national self-assurance and, at worst, an insularity and cultural isolation that was to have a lasting effect. Rowlandson's oeuvre was mainly watercolour, though he was also an accomplished printmaker and his erotic pieces, most of which have a strong satirical content, are found in both media. His exact contemporary, the excruciating caricaturist James Gillray (1756-1815), was less inclined towards the erotic but in some of his most brilliant pieces there is a tendency towards the salacious, though largely at the expense of his victims.



The Swiss artist Henry Fuseli (1741-1825), settled in London in 1764, eventually becoming Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy. His fevered Romantic style was the opposite of Rowlandson's robust and bawdy Regency approach. Fuseli's erotic world was fetishistic and introspective, peopled by dominant, fantastically coiffed women: the literary sophistication and strangeness of his work is not really indigenous to these islands. A few erotic sketches by fellow Romantic painter Turner (1775-1851) survive in the British Museum – those that escaped destruction by his prudish champion, John Ruskin, when he catalogued them after Turner's death. To say that Turner's erotic drawings were a significant part of his output, as were Fuseli's, would be an exaggeration. Probably like many artists of the nineteenth century he drew them as a private artistic diversion. Although vice flourished in London and other cities, especially in the form of its army of prostitutes, the climate was such that no overt reference could be made other than in reports and surveys made by those bent on social reform. Those nineteenth century British artists who produced sexually explicit art in their lifetimes – as some certainly would have done – either had their work destroyed by widows determined to preserve their reputation or mangled in self-censorship when they felt the first intimations of mortality.

So it is that the Victorian Age hands us down little or nothing in the way of erotic art until its last decade produced the flautist Aubrey Beardsley (1872-1898) whose whipash pen and ink drawings created a world of hothouse exoticism so characteristic of the decadent nineties and that both enthralled and appalled the society of the time. Unlike Rowlandson and Fuseli, however, Beardsley's explicitly erotic contribution was small: apart from his notorious *Envystrata* illustrations only one other drawing survives in the Victoria and Albert Museum collection.





## The Pre-war Period and After

At the turn of the century Sickert and Wilson Steer's female nudes placed in contemporary settings, were at last catching up with the social challenge set by Courbet in the mid 1850s and Manet a few years later. But in 1910 an exhibition organised by Roger Fry at the Grafton Gallery in London, *Manet and the Post Impressionists*, caused a storm of critical and public reaction: accusations of indecency, pornography and even fraud were hurled at Fry and his committee. The struggle of young British contemporaries over the next few years was not so much one of subject matter as of style, and overcoming the reactionary xenophobia of the moribund art establishment towards mainstream Continental art. The First World War acted as a break to any radical progress and the heavy pall of conservative austerity that hung over the arts in Britain lasted well into the 1950s. Occasional glimpses of Eros were to be seen in the work of Eric Gill (1882-1940), Duncan Grant (1885-1978), Stanley Spencer (1891-1959), Gertrude Hermes (1901-83), New Zealand born John Buckland Wright (1897-1954) and Keith Vaughan (1912-77).

Otherwise the area of human sexuality was left largely ignored until the advent of the Sixties. It was this decade's more liberal climate that prompted a group of young British artists to examine broader social issues than available within the confines of conventional portraiture, landscape and still life painting. Pop art was a movement that looked at a modern urban lifestyle hitherto often disregarded. Its references were to mass production and popular culture, which of course included most aspects of commercialised sex, whether 'girlie' photo magazines, illustrated fetish magazines such as those illustrated by the American artist Eric Stanton, or the increasing exploitation of sex by the advertising industry. Allen Jones developed this branch of Pop-art with an almost obsessive intensity: his commentary on contemporary sexuality went much further than the work of his peers in its exploration of this theme and can be seen as a watershed in the extremely unconstant development of erotic art in Britain.

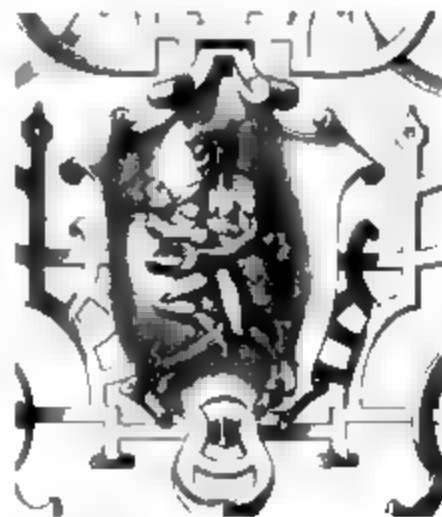


# TOM POULTON

## ARTIST, ILLUSTRATOR AND PORNOGRAPHER?

Thomas Leicester Poulton was born on the third of February 1897. He won a scholarship to the Slade in 1914 where he trained under Henry Tonks and, rather precociously, showed a painting the same year in the New English Art Club annual exhibition, giving his address as 27 Fitzroy Square. After World War I, from 1921 to 1926 he provided illustrations for *The British Journal of Surgery*. Commissions for the Nonesuch Press followed: *The Plurality of Worlds* and *The Complete Works of Paul Walton* (1929), *Plutarch's Lives* (1929-30) and the second edition of *The Weekend Book* (1930-1931). A rather curious interlude in his career as artist and illustrator seems to have occurred when he served in the Indian Army for some years, probably in the 1930's. Resuming his career as an illustrator, he produced many covers for *The Radio Times* and illustrated some of the *Readers Digest* condensed books. His illustration of a book on musical instruments can be linked to his first marriage to his first wife, a lutenist. In 1949 he was listed as a member of the exclusive Double Crown Club, best known for its membership of private press publishers and illustrators. He married again, but was separated from his second wife for some years before he died. Poulton's last years found him living alone in a Camden council flat, and his main social outlet seems to have been the Young's pub, The Lamb, in Lamb's Conduit Street, Bloomsbury: he drew illustrations of horses and drays for Young's Brewery — this famous pub had then, and to some extent still has, a very bohemian atmosphere and its popularity with artists and writers was considerable. He was remembered as a convivial and outgoing man whose literate, a most Proustian turn of mind and entertaining command of the English language made him extremely popular with other regulars. At his unexpected death on holiday in Stockport in April 1963 his friends at The Lamb had to organise a collection for his funeral expenses as there appeared to be no family members to take care of these arrangements.

Poulton's erotic work can be divided roughly into three parts: his sketches, his finished drawings and his humorous works. There is little doubt that Poulton almost never drew from photographs. His training at the Slade and as an anatomical illustrator developed in him a talent for drawing the human body that few others possessed. And, judging by the number of sketches he would make for each finished drawing, everything points to the inspiration for these sometimes complex human couplings to be from the artist's own imagination. It's unlikely that he drew them





from life – he would, of course, have taken full advantage of the life classes that every artist must attend perennially if he is to keep his drawing muscles supple – possibly he had willing girlfriends to pose for him.

What is less certain is whether Poulton carried out his erotic drawings for personal private pleasure or for a small circle of appreciative friends. Or whether he produced them for gain. We know that, towards the end of his life, money was short. He may well have accepted small commissions here and there – which would account for the rich variety of themes, some containing a distinctly fetishistic element, not all of which are publishable – even today.

Some themes recur: the artist and his model, sex in the backseat of a car, lesbian naval officers, the *menage à trois*, the adulterous couple discovered – and so on. Through these repeated images a picture of the artist's own sexual predilections emerges and, in a broader sense, a picture of the sexual tastes of his age is formed. They are remarkably similar to the themes of present-day pornography – straight sex between couples, oral sex, group sex and anal sex. The major difference being that, coming from the mind's eye, Poulton's imagery contains passion and true creativity while the pornographic colour photographs of the sex magazines available in most of Europe today (and their murky black and white antecedents) are mainly seen through the lens of a faded cameraman and capture the lustless couplings of professional models.



Poulton's more respectable work was, as is often the case, more subdued. An interesting parallel exists here between his work and that of the Neo-romantic painter Keith Vaughan. From about 1940, Vaughan kept a series of private sketchbooks in which he recorded his most intimate homosexual fantasies. While entirely recognisable as his work, these drawings are far more figurative than much of his public art – all the better, possibly, to provide the visual stimulus he required. So far apart from Duncan Grant and New Zealander John Buckland Wright – Vaughan and Poulton are the only British artists (or artists working in Britain) of this period whose work of a sexually explicit nature has come to light. While Vaughan, with his clear connections to Manton, Piper and Sutherland, is now considered to be in the mainstream of Modern British art, Poulton has become something of a footnote.

This had much to do with the hierarchical state of artistic society at the time. In an era when that arch-traditionalist and President of the Royal Academy, Sir Alfred Munnings, felt that he could come out with a public statement denigrating Picasso, it is clear that the establishment ruled and that the establishment was deeply conservative. Successful artists were landscape- or portraitist-academicians, happy to churn

out endless canvasses of aristocratic or plutocratic subjects be they horses, wives, country houses or chairmen of the board. Those whose main work was illustration were more often than not undeservedly at the lower end of the pecking order. There was, of course, the avant garde world of the Modernists – Moore, Nicholson and Suther and, for example – but its inhabitants largely sheltered from hostile and reactionary opinion under the ample umbrella of John Rothenstem's Tate Gallery patronage and were in less need of popular support.

A bright island of promiscuity, sexual sanity and cheerful disregard for who was who in the sea of post-war gloom was the bohemian life of Chelsea and Fitzrovia. There was the Chelsea Arts Club, a haven for an army of artists and their camp followers. In Soho or Fitzrovia there were countless pubs and drinking clubs where the more adventurous and affluent middle-class businessman would rub shoulders with the artists, set *Adem-monde* not quite on a par with that of Paris, but it was the best available without crossing the channel.

As is so often the case of those who leave few living friends and are estranged from descendants or family, Poulton's origins and private life are obscure. We know who commissioned his respectable work. And now we have this splendid legacy of his erotic work. But we know very little of Poulton the man. One imagines a sharp sense of humour, a delightfully conspicuous mind and marvellous zest for life.

## FIRST AID



## IN DIVERS CRISES



# THE PLATES

Tom Poulton's erotic drawings were largely executed in a soft pencil on a very lightweight paper. Occasionally he worked in pen and ink. His preferred paper size was typically either 11 by 8.5 inches or 17.5 by 11 inches.









































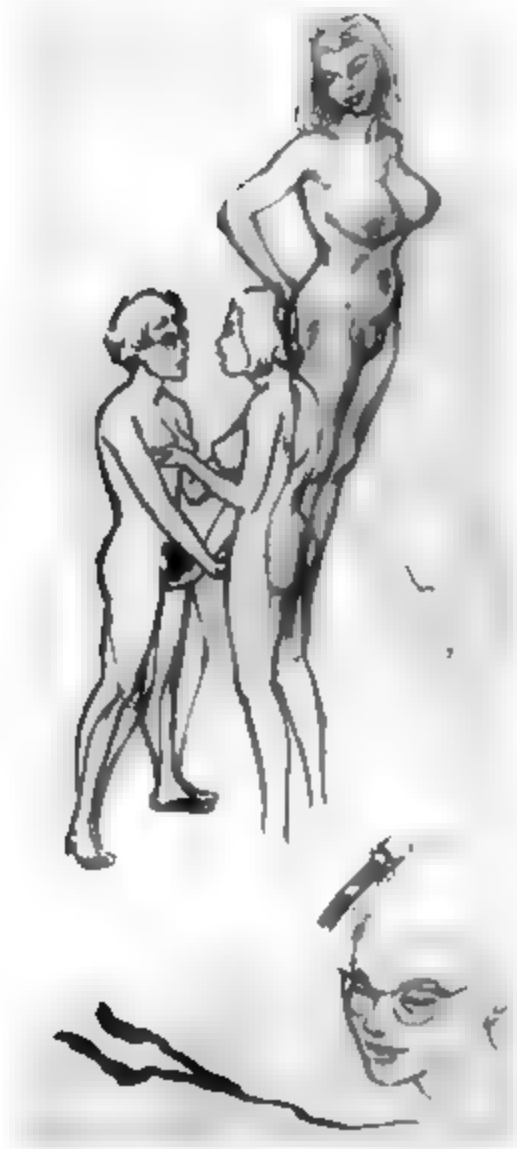




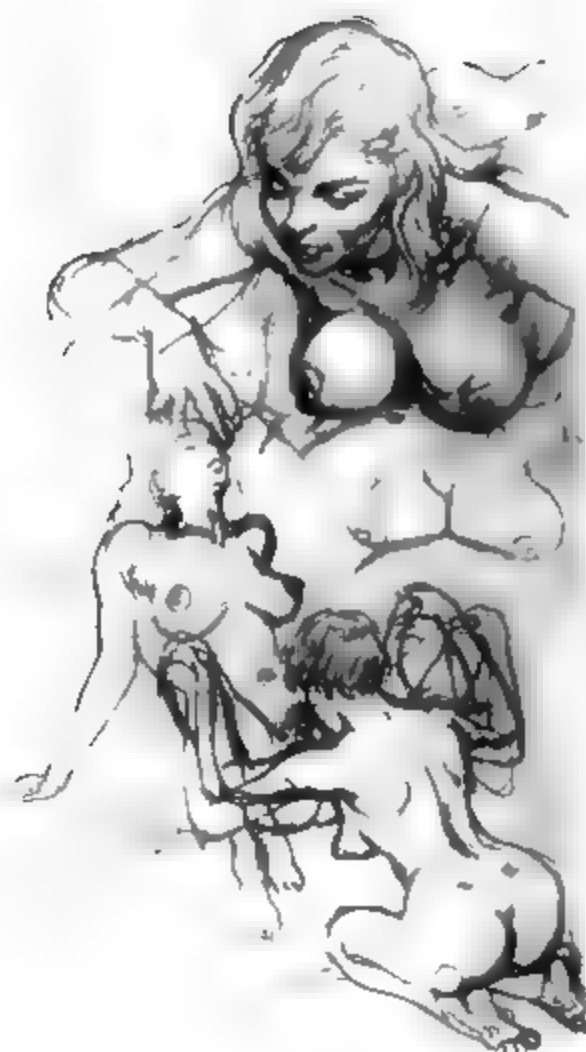






























6 ending Our way not across the sea To - know our common world





Please, Lady Bruce, y'are suffocating me'















Merry, how long does it take you to put that cat out













2. 6. Sorry to interrupt you but can we begin with the first part of the story?



Sorry Honorable The tented vault has not on earth this week



Hold it, Shandy! there's another guy out here say, hey, come to visit the room

“Lara and I’ve been ready a whole hour  
do think you might try to be punished  
on our very first date.”

















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no. 200

no. 200







An Unusual view

Facing Age Lesbian Lovers



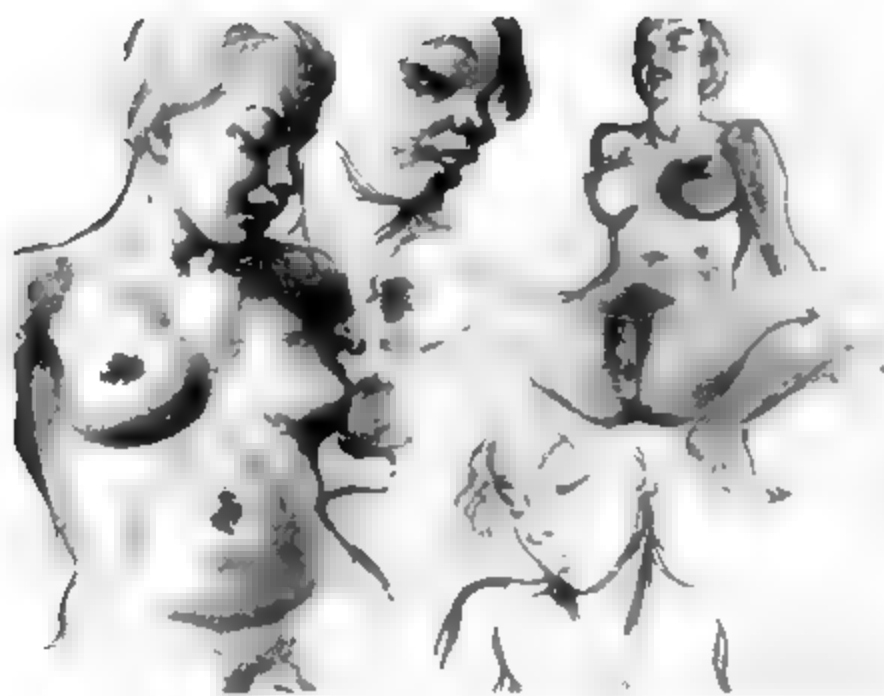














































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## THE *Erotic Print Society*

**T**his book brings to light for the first time the sexually explicit work of Tom Poulton, a reputable British artist who illustrated for the prestigious Nonesuch Press and the *Radio Times*. Poulton's erotic oeuvre, passionate, humorous and richly diverse, spans a time when such art would have been prosecuted for public sale or exhibition; it is not surprising that this remarkable group of drawings have only come to light thirty-five years after the artist's death. A new talent belatedly joins the small band of British artists whose erotic work has survived down the ages.

As a background to the drawings, James Maclean explores Poulton's secret world during the period after World War II and before the beginning of the 'permissive' era, and discovers the hidden face of sex in the supposedly prudish 1940s and 1950s. As well as Poulton's erotic work two anonymous 'underground' novellas are openly published for the first time.

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*Illustrated by* Tom Poulton, 1945

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